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RURAL WORK OF THE YOUNG MEN'S CHRISTIAN ASSOCIATION

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The county work, or rural department of the Young Men's Christian Association seeks to unite in a town, village, rural community, or in the open country the vital forces of young manhood for self improvement, physically, socially, mentally, and spiritually, and to give expression to these resources in community life for the betterment of others.

The Field.—It considers its legitimate field to include all communities that are too small to maintain the city type of Young Men's Christian Association work, generally conceded to include towns of four thousand and under. Experience has proven that its best work is done, however, in communities in which the rural environment dominates the community ideals. It therefore is a movement which must be determined from the standpoint of qualitative rather than quantitative values. There are 45,000 such communities in the United States and Canada with a combined population of boys and young men of over 12,000,000, thus including over sixty per cent of the boyhood and young manhood in this field. There are 2,000 counties considered organizable in the United States and 500 in Canada on the present basis of organization and type of work.

Its Beginnings.—The rapid development of the general Young Men's Christian Association movement, which addressed itself principally to the young men and boys of the cities, precipitated a general demand for work in small towns and country districts; but no constructive program was conceived until 1872 when the Association pioneer, Robert Weidensall, organized the first rural Young Men's Christian Association, in DuPage township, Will County, Illinois. In 1873 the supervisory aspect of the rural work was demonstrated in the voluntary supervision undertaken by a business man in Mason County, Illinois, who encouraged and supervised the

work in seven or eight small communities, which gave rise to the possibilities of what became known as the "County Work" with an employed secretary in charge. It was at this time that the experimentation with small town work under county-wide supervision began, but not until 1906 was it sufficiently developed to be officially recognized as a department of the International Committee.

County Work For County-Wide Co-operation.—The term "county work" is applied to this movement because the county affords a ready geographical unit for constructive work. Counties have distinctive traditions of their own, social elements, and existing organizations of a county-wide character. As the result of repeated failures in individual communities apart from other communities, a county-wide organization, commanding the combined resources of men and money within a county, made possible in community life that which could not have been accomplished independently.

Efficiency in Organization.—There are two factors that enter into this plan so essential to success—volunteer effort and expert supervision. The voluntary organization, the county committee, consisting of from fifteen to twenty prominent business and professional men and successful farmers, constitute the administrative unit and clearing house for policies and programs for the county-wide activities as well as for individual communities. These county committeemen are selected with great care, primarily meeting one of two qualifications: to be able to command resources of their own to promote this work for a period of years, or to possess such influence as to command the resources of others, both in time and money. They all must stand for the best things in community life, be vitally related to the church, to the school and other agencies that make for community progress. They constitute a voluntary body not unlike the faculty of a university at one time, or the health board of the county in another instance, as the clearing house for a religious campaign at another time, as a voluntary body of commissioners to advance the specific interests of a county, and in no uncertain degree measure out their best judgment frequently along the lines of advancing the agricultural or economic interests. Therefore, the county committee assigns these various aspects of its work to sub-committees, each of which renders its reports at the quarterly meeting of the county committee which works in close

contact with the employed secretary and trained experts. The county committee is responsible for a budget varying from \$2,000 to \$6,000 annually secured by voluntary contributions, which enables it to employ a secretary who is a trained expert as their executive officer. Thus the work is correlated and co-ordinated and a central clearing house is established through which any community and every community may find help and counsel in promoting internal welfare. In many instances the county committee has thus saved a community from expensive and painful experiments that have been previously proven impracticable.

The County Secretary.—“He is usually the fittest type of the college man, often not only a college graduate, but also with some special training. He is a man who loves country life and believes in the country and has great faith in the immediate future of the rural districts. The county secretaryship is fast being supplemented with agricultural college graduates. He is usually a man of large capacity for leadership, with a broad knowledge of human nature and a fine friendliness as well as an earnest Christian purpose and a great longing to help country boys and young men to well developed Christian manhood.”

He is in a real sense a community builder. As he is employed by a voluntary organization, his services and his largest contribution to a county will be in reproducing his expert knowledge and experience in volunteer service. Therefore, his primary task is to discover, enlist, train, and utilize leadership. He is also a servant. Pastors, Sunday School superintendents and teachers, public school superintendents and day school teachers, fathers and mothers, granges, farmers' clubs and institutes, women's clubs, and many other organizations seek his co-operation and advice. In the individual community, having discovered leaders and set them to work, he executes the plans and policies adopted by the county committee through volunteer leadership. His relationship is with the few men who are the leaders rather than with the masses. In addition to the county secretaries some of the older and larger counties are employing assistant secretaries, physical directors, boys' work directors, etc. There are now fifty such secretaries in forty-nine organized counties.

The Basis of Operation.—County work is not an attempt to build up a new organization in country communities. It recognizes

as the primary institutions of the community the home, the school, and the church. Many other supplemental organizations are doing splendid work, but the aforementioned are recognized as fundamental. It is also a fact that though these are the primary institutions, they are in many cases functioning inadequately, or have ceased to perform their function entirely. Again, in the supplementary organizations which are found in country life many are overlapping and even working at cross purposes. There seems to be no well defined or unified policy. Furnishing a common platform upon which the various interests of the people will find expression and where these interests can come together in a democratic spirit is the unifying task of the county work in the organized counties. It stands for the elimination of waste, for the interpretation of real needs after careful surveys have been made, for the assumption of specific tasks by specific individuals and communities. It gives itself to the awakening of a social consciousness, a getting together; it seeks to supplement and not to supplant. If it can persuade a virile type of a man to teach a class of boys in a Sunday School, or a leader to supervise the play and athletics of a school, or a farmer to give his boy a man's chance, it has made a contribution to the community life, and its leaders are as well satisfied as they would be if a new organization were formed.

Some Established Principles.—They may be briefly given as follows:

- A task for every man and a man for every task.
- A recognition of the resident forces as the redemptive forces.
- The approach to the rural problem a community approach.
- The recognition of the inherent value of country life in and for itself.
- The maximum development of constructive forces in community life.
- Trained leadership for community enterprises.
- Deliverance from the enervating paternalism of the city.
- To stem the tide which sweeps toward the city.
- Adequate preparation and appreciation for the problems of the city by those who must leave the environs of country life.
- Better health and sanitation in farm homes and country communities.
- A redirected educational system which will fit for life in the country.

A more scientific type of crop production and farm administration as essential to greater satisfaction in rural life.

A wholesome development of the recreative life.

For the increased power of the church.

Co-operation rather than competition.

A standardizing of operation. Membership is based upon what is given in service rather than what is secured in privileges. And finally a dominance of Christian ideals in the character of the manhood and boyhood of the country.

The County-wide Aspects.—Two, three, and four months and sometimes more time is given to a careful sociological survey, which is made by an expert before any attempt is made to organize a county, revealing the real needs for work in the county. Upon the results of these surveys a comprehensive policy for a period of years is outlined. This involves co-operation with experts from agricultural colleges, extension departments of universities, not to do things *for* the people, but *with* them. Other agencies also co-operate in county-wide activities, as in boys' and men's summer camps, inter-county relay races, play festivals and athletic meets, corn-growing contests, short term courses in agriculture. Social service at the county and state fairs is finding expression in rest tents, day nurseries, first aid hospitals, and in many of the county fairs the management and conduct of the athletics has been taken out of the hands of unscrupulous professionals and turned over to the Association leaders, with most gratifying results.

Community Interests Conserved.—No real progress in community life can be made with any degree of permanence without commensurate progress of its material wellbeing, and in the rural communities particularly the natural resources play an important part in demonstrations showing the possibilities of soil production. This is shown in the corn-growing, poultry-raising, and fruit-growing contests, in the horticultural classes and demonstrations, in potato-raising, in dairying, reforestation, etc. For this work it is necessary to secure the help of experts at experiment stations and agricultural colleges, which always comes more than enthusiastically. One-day courses are set up in various communities. The county secretary accompanies the experts from community to community. In some of the regularly organized counties as many as fourteen and sixteen rural centers are organized. This forms a ready approach

to a discussion and a solution of the economic problems before the younger generation.

Supplementary Education.—The boy in the country needs to have his school education supplemented by various other educational activities. A more intimate knowledge of the natural sciences, practical rather than academic, is imparted through simple talks on astronomy, biology, botany, zoology, geology, and on mathematical subjects related to the farm and to the home. This training in practical mathematics covers cost, accounting, measurements of garden plots, of the height of trees, and other necessary practice in mathematics. An extensive variety of "Practical Talks" with demonstrations is also conducted.

Social Aspects.—Country-life experts are unanimously agreed that what the country needs is social life. The inherent organization germ of the Young Men's Christian Association is social. It takes isolated communities and brings them together under the county work plan; it brings isolated individuals together in groups; it brings communities together in play, in inter-community debates, in inter-community agricultural contests, and in inter-community church movements. It eliminates the tendency to social stratification or the formation of cliques, which result naturally from the lack of social direction. A many-sided program of social activities is carried out involving neighborhoods, various homes and families, boys and girls.

It should be said that while the Association is addressing itself to the boy and young man in the country, its work naturally includes the girls and young women, particularly in social activities. It also emphasizes the need of a harmonious and closely unified community social life.

Civic Aspects.—The great need of an agrarian representation in our government affairs is apparent. We are still dominated by urban aggression, and the indifference and lack of intimate knowledge of governmental affairs as they relate themselves to rural interests is largely responsible for this condition. The better acquaintanceship of the 25,000 young men and boys in organized rural Associations with the members of their state legislatures and with congressional representatives who are invited to address them upon matters of vital current interest, will do much to bring about an appreciation of their civic rights. The conduct of town meetings in

which bills are introduced and discussed, involving their own community needs, the value of telephone franchises, of the good roads movement, the parcels post, the rural free delivery, postal savings bank, problems of the tariff as it affects the farmer, these are all subjects to be discussed in the various groups of the young men and boys.

Rural Recreation.—Rural recreation is another great factor in achieving a healthy consummation of content and normal living. Here the boy needs a normal physical expression, again socialized, particularly in the games, such as baseball, or in relay races, where one runner depends upon the other for the success of the team. This team work will do much to bring about a neighborly spirit of co-operation and neutralize individualistic tendencies. Community play days and community carnivals in which every boy and girl, man and woman takes part have been held. In one instance ninety per cent of the entire community turned out to spend the day together, the girls in their particular games, the boys in baseball and out-door basketball, the smaller children enjoying sand-boxes and children's games. These are known as the great community play carnivals.

Under this head must also be considered the conservation of rural health. Sanitation, domestic and community, hygiene, etc., are taken into consideration; practical talks and illustrated lectures are given; the rural school teacher is encouraged and aided in organizing plays and games during the recess periods; Sunday Schools are brought together in athletic leagues; and many other similar efforts afford the rare opportunity to the county secretary in some genuine social engineering.

The Home.—The whole question of the home is vitally involved in rural community progress, which implies a more intimate knowledge of the needs of the home and the conditions that must be met before home life can be made satisfactory. Among the results of this better knowledge will be the further invention and introduction of labor-saving devices. The spirit of the home will be conserved by the development of a closer relation between parents and children and children and parents, and by the awakening in the minds of the parents of a need for boy-mindedness and girl-mindedness. Many parents' meetings are held where emphasis is being laid upon the comradeship and friendship of parents and their children, as

well as the need of inspiring boys and girls to a greater interest in the arrangement of the home and in conserving its spirit and orderliness. The important matter of sex hygiene is not overlooked in this domestic educational campaign.

Religion in the Country.—Real progress in country life cannot be made without the great spiritual forces, and therefore the Young Men's Christian Association puts first and foremost the spiritual motive in everything. It holds out no selfish incentive to those who would join in its efforts. The organization is based upon the getting together to do something for the community. Under the stimulating force in a well-trained and vigorous personality, the country boy is enabled to overcome conditions in which he finds himself, and in the overcoming develops his best qualities into a masterful manhood. The starting of Bible study classes, co-operation with Sunday Schools to bring the boy into a realization of a virile religious life and meetings in isolated neighborhoods by young men are some of the religious activities.

Much is being said these days about federation of the rural church, but there is an aspect of federation about which very little is being said. This is the bringing together of community forces, boys and young men, regardless of denominational lines, and the working together for a community program involving the entire realm of economics, education, social life, civics, recreation, the home, and the spiritual forces.

Conserved by State and International Organizations.—Twenty-two state and provincial committees of the United States and Canada have separate sub-committees on rural work and employ experts who maintain direct relationships to the county secretaries and county committees and who with their committees constitute a clearing house for the state. In similar lines the International Committee through its sub-committee on rural work employs five experts who are related to the various state departments and provincial departments of the United States and Canada, where a clearing house is maintained from a national standpoint. It is to this department that already requests have been sent from Great Britain, India, Japan, and other nations that are desirous of having the county work movement of the Young Men's Christian Association. The official organ of the movement, "Rural Manhood," is published by this committee.

A movement which commands the confidence of business men to the extent of a quarter of a million dollars a year at the present time, which enlists 2,000 leaders and committeemen and which reaches in its activities more than 25,000 young men and boys in 500 communities with 62 trained experts and 35 years of experience, is glad to share in a small degree at least in the present onward movement for country-life progress.